Interview

Customer first thinking.

Designing for Emotion:

An Interview with Jean-Pierre Lacroix, Founder and President, Shikatani Lacroix Design

Jean Pierre Lacroix:

Jean Pierre Lacroix is the Founder and President of Shikatani Lacroix Design and the author of the "ThinkBlink Manifesto".

Is it better to appeal to a consumer's head or to the heart?

Back in the mid-20th century, during the embryonic years of mass marketing, that question wasn't even up for debate. Marketers automatically assumed that consumers wanted to see the facts first. So a brand had to prove through its advertising that the product was superior: "Here's why our freezer is best", backed by a set of functional claims ("Freezes twice as fast"), supported by scientific proof ("Independent lab tests show that…"). The copy-heavy ads were often illustrated with pictures of happy housewives swooning over the product.

At the time consumer behavioural research figured that people were inherently rational beings. As consumers, they absorbed the facts, mulled over the features and benefits, carefully weighed the competitive trade-offs, and then made a calculated decision to buy. They moved progressively along a linear path through the stages of Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. Marketing messaging had to work hard at giving a potential buyer a clear and defensible "reason why" based on its "unique value".

That theory was upended in the 1960s with the Creative Revolution in advertising, sparked by a counter-cultural uprising amongst young adults looking to break free from social conformism. To connect with this new, free-thinking generation brands had to become more culturally relevant. And the fast growing visual medium of TV forced advertisers to abandon hard sell copy in favour of more aspirational lifestyle imagery depicting "The Good Life". In an era when all consumer products seemed to come off the same assembly line, advertisers tried to differentiate their brands by playing to people's innate desires and emotions instead of playing up the functional utility of the products.

The creative breakthrough came in 1959 when Bill Bernbach's agency DDB boldly launched the "Think Small" campaign for the newly arrived Volkswagen Beetle. The Beetle ads broke all the old rules of advertising: they were irreverent, tongue-in-cheek and self-deprecating. Their anti-establishment tone resonated with new car buyers who could identify with the renegade positioning. Buying a Beetle soon became a cultural statement. The campaign was so successful that it convinced the entire ad industry to pivot. This historical turning point was memorialized in an episode of Mad Men when Don Draper, listening to his creative team mock the minimalist ad design, says, "I don't know what I hate about it the most—the ad or the car - but say what you want, love it or hate it, the fact remains we've been talking about this for the last 15 minutes."

It took a while for behavioural psychology to catch up with the Creative Revolution's recognition of emotion as a catalyst of consumer choice. The turning point came in 1980 when social psychologist Robert Zajonc published a paper called "Preferences

Need No Inferences" in which he argued that people instinctively feel before they think. As consumers they make an instantaneous, emotional decision to buy, and then fall back on logic to rationalize that choice. Capture the heart first, he advised, and the mind will invariably follow.

Much later on, in 1994, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, after clinically studying patients whose emotional parts of the brain had been damaged, concluded that people are incapable of making even the simplest of choices if they are deprived of their ability to feel emotion. In other words, people are mostly guided in the choices they make by gut instinct. They prefer to go with whatever decision feels right. His discovery was further validated by Daniel Kahneman who in his landmark book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" outlined two types of thinking: System 1, ruled by emotion, and System 2, driven by reason. He made the case that 90% of our decisions are driven by emotion.

These research findings confirmed for marketers that first impressions matter. If feelings do in fact trump thinking, then the job of brand advertising was to influence the emotions consumers feel in the moment. And, according to Jean-Pierre Lacroix, co-founder of Shikatani Lacroix Design (SLD), one of the world's foremost design agencies, that moment occurs in the blink of an eye - what he calls the "Blink Factor" - the fractions of a second that a brand has to make an immediate and indelible impression through sensory cues. The trick, of course, is knowing which emotion to trigger.

Jean-Pierre founded his agency in 1991 along with his creative partner at the time Ed Shikatani. Today his client roster includes such powerhouse brands as PepsiCo, Kraft and Cineplex. The core philosophy of his agency centers around the idea of "ThinkBlink", the major tenets of which he describes in his latest book, "The ThinkBlink Manifesto". What makes his agency different from most design shops is that work on the visual assets only begins after a rigorous strategic analysis. That makes his agency more of a hybrid shop, specializing in full brand transformations by combining the traditional strategic work of a branding agency with what he calls "immersive experience design".

SS **Stephen Shaw (SS):** What drew you to graphic design as a career? Because I think you also considered joining the Air Force.

JL **Jean-Pierre Lacroix (JL):** My dad was in the Canadian Royal Air Force. I grew up on an Air Force base. And I always had an interest in flying. But my true passion was design and drawing. I applied to both ROTP [Regular Officer Training Plan] and Sheridan College [Oakville, Ontario] and said to myself, whoever responded first would be where I go in my career. Sheridan College responded within weeks. So I went to Sheridan and graduated top of my class. I got a job at 50 Fingers, a design firm that became Spencer Francey Peters - I think their name today is Trajectory. Back then we designed album covers for musicians and that was a lot of fun. We did some crazy things. I remember shooting an artist underwater in a swimming pool and almost drowning the poor guy.

SS Working there must have been a foundational learning experience for you.

JL It was great learning. Peter Francey was an incredible leader. Even as a young designer with one year of experience, I was brought into meetings to present my creative. I was there for about three years. And then a friend of mine convinced me to go work for Savage Sloan[1]. At the time, they were the leading industrial design firm in Canada. They had Shell and Labatt. So I got to work on consumer packaged goods, but also some environmental design for Shell, and I really enjoyed that. But David Savage[2] had visions of me becoming a partner, and I was too young to really see the value of that.

So I ended up leaving there to work at McCann Erickson, working in a division called Nova Communication. And there we did point of sale, POP, and all of that fun stuff. Working in a big advertising agency was key learning. My mentor then was Brian Cahill[3]. And Brian said, "Hey JP, you're an okay designer, but you're much better in meetings and presentations. I'm going to take the drafting table away from you, and I'm going to give you a desk, and your role now is to service clients". At first, I was kind of crushed, but he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, which is being a good communicator and a good strategist. And that has shaped my career.

SS Moving from a small to big agency must have been a cultural shock for you.

JL Oh, it was! And the politics that came with it taught me that's not what I wanted in my career. I remember we had won the Kodak account at McCann. It was a big win. And at the time, we'd also been working on Tetley. I was managing their packaging transformation. One day I came into the office and just said this is not for me. I don't like the politics. I don't like big business. I'm going to start my own firm with a friend of mine. And so I started Boulevard Communication. And we were lucky because the McCann clients were so passionate about our relationship that the agency put me on a retainer to continue working on those accounts. It was a smart move for them because they were big accounts. And that became the foundation of Boulevard, my first company. We became the largest branding and consulting firm in Canada. We had 150 people in Toronto. We had basically a whole city block. We had an office in LA with 30 people and had purchased a company in Vancouver with 10. We were in the process of acquiring a firm in New York. But working within a group of partners proved to be a real challenge. So I started Shikatani Lacroix Design with a junior partner at the time who I made an equal partner and then I bought him out 10 years later.

SS What accounts for your success as a design shop?

JL A singular, focused, razor sharp attention to this premise: that people don't make decisions rationally, they make decisions emotionally. And design is a very effective tool in reflecting and harnessing those emotions to the benefit of the brand. And so the "Blink Factor" is all about understanding that people not only make those decisions emotionally, but they make them in a split second.

There are two main parts of the brain: One is instinctive, emotional, the other one is slow, meticulous. The meticulous side of the brain requires a lot of energy. But the brain doesn't want to use up the energy, it wants to take the easy route. And so we use the limbic part of the brain to make quick decisions. The "Blink Factor" is all about these emotional shortcuts - making that buying decision easy for the consumer by making the brand visible through distinctive colour and shape; by telling a story that is compelling; that talks to moments in customers' lives; and a variety of other factors that you can find in my book.

We actually developed "ThinkBlink" and the "Blink Factor" in 1990 when we started the company. Today it's even more important because you've got news and information that's not factual. You've got in a typical retail store today 80,000 products, whereas before, when I grew up, we were lucky if there was 15,000 products. The average family has both parents working. They're stressed for time. And so the "Blink Factor" is actually more important now than ever before. And now with AI, it's even more important.

SS How did you first come up with the "Blink Factor" concept?

JL At the time we were doing some research for Pizza Hut and consumers were saying, "I'm going to the 'Red Roof' for dinner with my family". We said, "What do you mean going to the 'red roof'? It's called Pizza Hut." We were looking at different names for Pizza Hut, like Pizza Hut Cafe. So, okay, we're going to have an issue here if customers don't even call the brand by its name, they call it by its shape. Why is that happening? So I did some research. There was very little research on emotional connections at the time, almost none. But there was this one study that said 40% of all communication is visual, 80% is colour and shape. And color and shape is how you connect emotionally with products. So I said, well, that's interesting, what a thought. And then I coined the phrase the "Blink Factor". We trademarked it in 1993. This was 10 years before the book "Blink" by Malcolm Gladwell[4] came out.

SS Are you typically brought in by a client to address a specific design challenge or a wholesale brand transformation? And if it's just a specific project, how do you work within the constraints of pre-existing brand standards?

JL Picture if you will a 2-sided matrix representing the degree of brand transformation required. The horizontal axis is the relevancy risk, low to high, and the vertical is the urgency for change, from evolution to revolution. Is the relevancy of the brand under attack? The level of risk to the brand determines the urgency, from evolution to revolution.

I'll use an example, Comp USA[5], where we worked on their full transformation. The relevancy was severe and the need for transformation was severe, so they fit into the top right quadrant of the matrix. We recommended a lot of things that they didn't believe were right. But they were wrong and, unfortunately, they paid the price and so did the shareholders. But then there are other brands like Gatorade, Miss Vickies's, Pepsi that are not at risk, but if they stay the way they are now, they will be at risk long term. And so there you do an evolutionary design where you tweak, modify, maybe reduce some elements on the packaging.

SS So before you put pen to paper, so to speak, you're really delivering a brand strategy, is that fair to say?

JL It is very fair to say. And so the first step is a gap analysis. We look at where we are, where we need to be, and the levers of change. We will look at who their current customers are, who their future customers could be, the competitive set, what are they doing, and then we look outside the category because the solution of a client's problem often isn't within the industry, it's outside the industry.

And then we do interviews with the management team and a variety of other tools we have, including applying an evaluation based on the "Seven Tenets"[6]. We have an AI model we use that's very, very detailed and very predictive. And so we present an opportunity report to the client, in which we say here is the degree of change you need to have, here's where those changes need to happen, why they need to happen and the different scenarios we need to consider to make them happen.

SS It sounds to me like the process you go through - the rigour of what you do, the analysis before putting pen to paper - is a big differentiator, is it not?

JL It is. It is. A lot of agencies will say they do that, but they don't do it to the level of rigour that we do. And also they don't have the proprietary tools we have. When we go through this entire process, the impact is enormous.

I'll use an example: Tetley Tea. We found that the biggest challenge for their specialty tea wasn't the flavours, wasn't the varieties, it was the actual packaging – the fact that it doesn't store the product properly, doesn't keep it fresh. We introduced these round canisters that had fewer bags in it, smaller package, so they could actually have double or triple the facing at retail. It grew their business by forty per cent – forty per cent! For a brand that was already dominant in the marketplace, that already was the market leader. So that's the strategic process we have that very few others have.

SS What's the one thing you need to hear from a client before you agree to work with them?

JL The key red flag is alignment. And I'll give you an example. We were hired to do a major transformation for OfficeMax[7]. Now, the way OfficeMax was structured is they had a President for Retail, a President for E-commerce, and a President of the holding company. We were brought in by the Retail Group to develop a new store concept for them. And through our process, we identified that they needed to go from 27,000 square foot rural stores to an urban 50,000 square foot store and change who they're going after. They were going after, instead of families, small businesses which required a whole rethinking of their service offering, their product mix, everything.

So we're in a major three day strategic retreat with all of their executives and we're starting to present the opportunity report and some of the scenarios we need to explore as part of the workshop we were going to do. And then the President of the holding company said to the President of Retail: "Where did this come from? This is not what we agreed to. This is not the direction we want to go. We need to be more radical or we need to consider a format in the suburbs because that's where all our stores are".

It got heated and so they left the meeting for half an hour to hash it out. Then they came back and said, you'll follow what the Retail President wants to do. That's a lack of alignment. It went further because the Merchandise Group weren't aligned with the vision either. So they didn't help us. We built three stores and after the success of the third store the Merchandise Group finally said, hey, I think we need to help you on the assortment mix. So internal alignment is critical.

SS How do you do that litmus test?

JL We do a project charter to start off with. We then do management interviews with all of these individuals and identify where they're convergent and divergent with our thinking. And that helps us overcome some of these internal challenges. Because we have not done one project yet where there is 100% alignment within a company. There's always a group or a cluster of groups who see the future differently.

SS That's common with most transformation projects. There'll always be a group of resistors.

JL It's either they hate change or the impact we're going to make on their business may impact their department. For example, at OfficeMax, we said there's higher margin in providing services than there is selling paper. Amazon is going to have you over the barrel in a couple of years, so don't build your business on something you're going to lose anyway. But the group that was selling paper and ink cartridges, they didn't like us. They didn't like the strategy because it was going to affect their area of expertise.

SS When you're working with a client, what's the one thing they inevitably fail to do that makes your job so much harder?

JL When they've already decided what they want. And I'll use Dairy Queen as a perfect example of that. When we were hired by Dairy Queen, they were struggling to sell food. Even though they'd been selling hot dogs and hamburgers and fries since the chain started, they had little credibility. When consumers were thinking of hot food, Dairy Queen wasn't on the list. And so their solution, when we were brought in, was to launch a new burger, right? A new burger. And we said, no, that's not going to solve the problem. Because it's not about food – it's about the experience. You don't have credibility to sell hot food. We got into a huge argument but luckily the leadership stuck to our process and we launched DQ Grill and Chill to what may me the greatest success story of any food service operator: 15 years of consecutive double digit growth. Now it's owned by Warren Buffett. He doesn't share the sales numbers, but I can tell you McDonald's would be envious of what we did with Dairy Queen.

SS I presume you also have to gain the alignment of the agency of record that may be in charge of the branding strategy. How do you navigate that potential conflict?

JL We involve them right from the beginning. We involve them in the brainstorming session because we want everyone at the table to have a contribution to the success of the program. A while back TD came to us - and TD has some amazing advertising agencies - they came to us and said, you've been managing our brand for 30 years. Because we're having trouble thinking outside the box, we want you to manage what the next campaign should be. You need to be the lead consultant. And so we had a huge brainstorming session with all the advertising agencies. And you have to understand, they're all fighting for a piece of that pie. But everybody participated because they all had skin in the game. It wasn't the broadcast agency's idea - it was everyone's idea.

SS Well, I've been down that path myself so I know there are often sharks in the water.

JL Oh yeah.

SS You say in the book that a brand needs to determine the exact emotion they should own. And that obviously can't be easy. Can you provide an overview of actually how you land on the right emotion?

JL So owning an emotional moment or equity is critical because that's the foundation. It's the razor edge that's going to direct all of your communication, your strategy and your marketing. So to get there we have a model we use, we have partners we work with, where we map out the emotional equities of the category. What is that sweet spot that consumers aspire to when they're buying within that category? Maybe it's discovery, or reassurance, or recognition. And then we do an analysis of the different brands that compete in that category. Which territories do they own? Like if you use banks, which to a certain degree are all commoditized, what does RBC own versus TD versus BMO versus Scotia, right? And so then you make an analysis of here's the white space. Here's the one emotional word that you need to own, say: Comfort. You need to own comfort. Why comfort? Because banking is a pain in the butt, right? It's complex, it's confusing, it's full of rules. We're going to make it comfortable for you to bank with us. We're going to make the hours longer, we're going to open more branches than any of our competitors - that's TD.

TD built their whole model around comfort because that was an unmet need in the marketplace, an emotional need. Now, are they talking comfort today? Not at all. Why? Because Scotia is as comfortable as RBC as TD. Now TD is called more "human". Why? Because we have AI and we have technology and it's all confusing. And when we want to deal with the bank, we want to deal with humans in the bank, regardless if it's on the phone or on the web or in the branch. And TD is really smart to do that because they're answering an emotional needs state.

SS In the book, you talk a lot about Hotspex Research[8] being a key supplier for you in helping to arrive at that one emotional moment. How do you incorporate their methodologies in your work?

JL They're part of the initial assessment and then they're part of the validation of the concepts. Hotspex's been part of our process since they started. We were one of their first clients. When Shane Skillen started the company 25 years ago, we were doing research for Tetley on their brand architecture, and we brought them in to do an emotional analysis. And by the way, Tetley is number one in the tea category in Canada and maintains that position today just as it did when we started working with them.

SS Let's delve into another statement in your book, that you believe brands need to shift from products to meaningful immersive experiences. Can you just explain what you mean by that?

JL Immersive is the deepest emotional connection you can have with your customer. Memorable experiences trigger recall when you're looking at the product on the shelf, or you're looking at buying a car or clothing.

SS One of the more contentious debates in brand advertising is the one about differentiation versus distinctiveness. What side of that debate are you on?

JL Oh, it's a great question. I land on differentiation because you can be distinctive and totally irrelevant. So let me use a perfect example. It's very topical right now. Spotify's new logo - it is distinctive, a disco ball, but it's not differentiated. Their old logo was differentiated. And so, you've got to be careful. Distinctive means that it's kind of unique. It's not expected. And if distinctive supports a point of differentiation, if it supports the Blink Factor, supports the emotional connection and the memory recall, then, okay, it's right. But if it's a distinctiveness for the sake of distinctiveness, then it's wrong. And I think the Spotify disco ball logo is wrong because it brings back a memory of disco dancing. And to me, that pigeonholes your brand in an era. If you're Gen Z who didn't grow up with disco dancing, that disco ball is totally irrelevant.

SS Identify the point of difference, correlate it with one specific emotion, and then simplify your messaging and visual metaphors around it. Is that the essence of your approach?

JL Correct. Well, eliminate all the noise, right? I mean marketers try to tag too many messages to their brands. It's buckshot. Clients will say, here's the hierarchy of communication: we've got 12 levels. And oh, by the way, here's all of the legal copy. Doesn't work! We're asking our brain to remember things, to read things, that add to the complexity of the decision process. And so keeping it simple, singular in approach, focused on the most salient, relevant information is critical. We're working on a major project right now. When we had done the research, we said here's the most salient point why the consumer is buying this product category – it's number 12 of 14 on your list - but it's the number one thing. So we said, forget your hierarchy! This is the hierarchy we're going to use because it's the one that's relevant to how consumers buy your brand. It's not how you think they buy your brand. This is how they buy your brand.

SS What do you do when there's no clear differentiating factor?

JL Well, every category is like that. Not just banks - detergent, cereals, you name the category, they've all commoditized. And so it's about owning an emotion, being singular and then driving that message consistently.

SS You use the term emotional equity. How do you actually measure emotional equity?

JL Emotional equity is the emotion that you own that is very relevant to your consumers. And you measure that with tools like Hotspex, plus other tools out there. So it's going beyond NPS scores. I'm not a big believer in NPS scores. I think it's total hogwash. Its not measurable from a standpoint of action.

So here's what I like to measure. Did that individual share on their social media a positive moment with your brand? And how many of your customers have done that? It's not tied to a questionnaire where you have a slider and move it to a number from one to ten. No, it's based on action by individuals staking a claim on the relationship they have with their brand.

SS There's how people feel about a brand just based on what they see or hear - so traditional measures like brand favourability, top of mind, purchase intent, et cetera – and then there's the brand loyalty question which is, do I feel strongly enough about this brand to be truly committed to buying it under any circumstances. You need a mix of both, don't you think? A composite measure?

JL Yeah, absolutely. What I'm not proposing is that you walk away from the fundamental metrics of the industry. What I'm saying is there's a gap in those metrics where we're not truly evaluating the emotional equity of your brand. If I said to you 80% of all buying decisions are emotional, how would you weigh your statistics? Right now they're all weighed on the functional side. They're not weighed on the emotional sides So it's finding that mix and then putting more emphasis on understanding how are you making your customers feel about your brand.

SS How is AI affecting the design industry as a whole? And how are you using it today to augment what you do?

JL We use it to solve repetitive tasks. So meeting minutes, contact reports, they're laborious. So now you audio record the session, it gives you a full report, structured the way you want it, of that meeting. And it's done in two minutes, right? What would take you an hour is done in two minutes. So it frees up the account team to focus on building a relationship with a client, not doing a lot of paperwork. It helps streamline our processes from an accounting standpoint, from a project management standpoint. We have a proprietary project management software program we developed called Team Client that's still ahead of the industry by probably 20 years. And now we're using AI to give us unique performance dashboards. AI in Photoshop helps us fill in the frames, replace the backgrounds, quick changes that bring little value, are now happening in minutes. And so we're spending our time being designers designing versus spending our time photoshopping that package in the background.

SS Is it being used at all to support ideation?

JL Absolutely. On the strategy side, it does all that. It opens the whole floodgate on options that you may never have considered. And so, brainstorming naming conventions and things like that is fantastic. Doing research on competitors. Great tool. You can do a competitive analysis. It can be done in minutes versus weeks. You still need humans to review - you could never take what it does and just give it to a client. That'd be disastrous.

Now let's flip to the negative side of AI: clients coming to us and saying, "I created this package, now can you execute it?". Not a good thing, because they created it. They are attached to it. It could be a piece of crap, right? Or it could be off strategy. But because they created it, there's a sense of ownership. And so we're spending time now developing processes to educate clients. When they present us stuff, we evaluate their ideas against our Blink Factor tenets and often they score very poorly.

SS You're a member of the Association of Professional Futurists. Putting your futurist hat on, how do you see brand management evolving over the next few years?

JL Brand management is going to change dramatically. There's going to be a bigger divide in the compliance side of brand management versus the creative side of brand management. AI is going to own the compliance side: Is the tone of this copy aligned with the brand equities? Are there any legal implications to what we're doing? AI will ensure the brand voice is consistent and coherent and that's fantastic because, in brand management, brand managers change every year. So you won't have a lack of consistency.

On the flip side, AI is going to allow us to be a lot more creative. A lot of time today is spent on idea iteration. We like this idea, but give me two or three options of how to bring it to life. AI is going to be able to do that in minutes, not weeks, creating storyboards and visual representations. So we're saving time. So iteration, where agencies make a lot of money, is going to go away. That's not where they're going to make their revenue. They're going to make their revenue by coming up with a brilliant idea and then demonstrating how it gets iterated in these different ways.

1. Savage Sloan was a prominent Canadian graphic design and branding agency best known for creating the original Toronto Blue Jays logo.

2. The Savage Sloan co-founder David Savage passed away in 2014.

3. Brian Cahill was a Canadian ad executive who served as Senior Vice President and Managing Director for McCann-Erickson.

4. "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" by Malcolm Gladwell was published in 2005 and explores how the human subconscious works and makes snap judgments "in the blink of an eye".

5. CompUSA was an American "superstore" retailer and reseller of personal computers, software, and consumer electronics which ceased operations in 2012.

6. The "Seven Tenets" is the core planning framework of the ThinkBlink Manifesto.

7. OfficeMax was an American big-box retailer and business-to-business supplier of office products, furniture, and technology that was eventually acquired by rival Office Depot in 2013.

8. Hotspex is a global market research consultancy led by CEO Shane Skillen which uses behavioral science and emotional mapping to help companies understand consumer motivations.

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